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Gulf Strategy: Both Big Powers Gain

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WASHINGTON, Nov. 23 — In justifying his secret arms deal with Teheran, President Reagan cited Iran's strategic importance and the Soviet threat not only to Iran but also to the entire Persian Gulf region.

Military Analysis These same concerns were expressed by President Carter in 1980 when he warned, in response to the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan in December 1979, that the United States would use military force to defend its "vital interests" in the region.

In the almost seven years between the Reagan and Carter speeches, both the United States and the Soviet Union have done much to improve their ability to fight in the region, according to military experts who study the balance of superpower forces there.

The increase in Soviet military strength marks a major commitment by Moscow to upgrading the equipment and training of its forces in its southern theater of operations. In 1980 Western military experts questioned the seriousness of the Soviet deployment, noting that Soviet units along the Iranian border were of low quality and readiness. This view was confirmed by the poor performance of the Soviet units initially sent to fight in Afghanistan.

In the years since, Pentagon sources

say, the 32 Soviet divisions now stationed in the border region of southwestern Asia, while remaining under strength, have been given the latest arms, including the most modern tanks and artillery.

Before 1980, American intelligence reported, the best equipment went to Soviet forces facing units of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization in Europe and the Chinese troops in the Far East. The Soviet Union's southern military theater made do with older secondhand equipment. Now it merits the same priority.

The Russians are also known to have substantially improved their communications and command in the area. The headquarters for regional Soviet forces is 100 miles north of the Iranian border in the city of Baku, capital of the Soviet Republic of Azerbaijan.

An indication of the increased importance given the southern theater, American military sources say, was the appointment in 1985 of Gen. Mikhail M. Zaitsev as regional commander. General Zaitsev, whom NATO officers regard highly, was the Chief of Staff of Soviet forces in East Germany before assuming his current command, which includes the force in Afghanistan.

Upon arriving at Baku, General Zaitsev started a vigorous training program, with an emphasis on offensive operations. His training efforts continue, American intelligence sources say.

Soviet Concerns Cited

Western military sources say they do not believe these Soviet improvements are in reaction to the better American fighting ability in the region. These sources say that in spite of the American improvements, the Russians believe the United States is limited in its ability to fight in the Persian Gulf and Iran because of the area's remoteness from the United States and the concentration of American forces in Europe.

Rather, the buildup of the Soviet forces is believed related to Moscow's concerns about Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Russians were apparently embarrassed by the poor combat performance of their soldiers in the early days of the war in Afghanistan and set about to shake up the southern command. Their efforts are also viewed as an attempt to intimidate Pakistan and to discourage it from providing aid to the Afghan insurgents.

One American military expert said

he doubted that Iran was a military target of improved Soviet forces. The Russians seem more intent on wooing Teheran than threatening it, most military analysts say, although they acknowledge that a power struggle in Iran leading to civil war could change Soviet policy.

In any case, most of the Soviet forces in the region are operating at reduced strength, despite their improved readiness and would need a call-up of reserves before they could effectively be sent into combat.

Western military experts also assume that the Russians would not lightly undertake an invasion of Iran while they were tied down in Afghanistan and uncertain about an American reaction.

U.S. Called Better Prepared

Senior Pentagon officials say they believe the United States is better prepared today to confront any Soviet moves than it was in 1980, when President Carter warned in his State of the Union address that the United States would fight for its vital interests in the Persian Gulf.

At that time, American armed forces were ill prepared to resist any Soviet effort to consolidate a strategic position that would threaten the free passage of oil from the Gulf countries. The United States had neither the forces nor equipment to defend the region. More important, ships and aircraft needed to move any American forces to the Persian Gulf were inadequate.

Many military leaders believed at the time that Mr. Carter was either poorly informed about American military abilities or was trying to deter any Soviet moves by bluffing.

Since then, the Pentagon has developed a rapid deployment force, called the Central Command, made up of Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine units earmarked from other commands, and has improved its ability to deliver the units to the region. The ability to supply these forces by air or sea has also improved, and equipment and supplies have been positioned in the Indian Ocean.